



Religion and Emotion in the Time of Coronavirus

By Sitawa Namwalie



I first started taking sports seriously when I transferred from Kilimani Primary School to Loreto Convent Valley Road. In my old school I had been comfortably mediocre, an indistinguishable lump of existence. I had very little sense of myself and tended to drift with the crowd. And I was definitely not known for any sporting prowess despite the school having an excellent sports programme, typical of the schools which had been the preserve of white settler children under Kenya's colonial apartheid system. At Kilimani I remember chasing after my friend Esther Musundi, a gifted runner, whom I could never catch. As for team sports, hockey, rounders and netball, I never made any team. The other girls were quicker, bigger and more skilled than I was. I avoided hockey like the plague to avoid being murdered by a powerful girl in my class who could hit the ball harder than any of the senior boys. It was at Valley Road that I discovered that hitting a ball harder than anyone else was not playing hockey.

My class of 24 girls had five non-whites, two of whom were fellow Africans, and these two avoided me as if I carried a contagious disease. On that first day at LCVR, my new school, I arrived early and picked a seat right in the front of the class. I was feeling self-conscious in my brand new too-long, too-baggy uniform, which was a weird indeterminate colour, neither light blue nor light green. And then, the owner of the seat arrived and, speaking in an assertive tone, sent me to the back of the class to sit next to another African girl who appeared to have accepted her place on the margins. In

the six years we were at school together, I never saw that girl step out of her place even once. She had drowned and lived submerged in an ocean where she could never be anything but wrong.

And so, within the first hour in my new school, my sense of self had been attacked in those ways that were inevitable for an African child sent to desegregate white spaces. In early 1970s Kenya, these white spaces were dominated by an often vicious settler class engaged in a futile game of defending their shrinking territory in a newly independent African country.

At my new school, I attempted to consolidate what it meant to be rejected and consigned to the periphery. But unlike the many other times when I met such moments with acquiescing silence, something came over me, and instead of acceptance, I started to plot my revenge. I remember thinking "They will know me". The rejection and discomfort I experienced in my new school literally woke me up and for the first time in my life I became aware of myself as a distinct entity with preferences, feelings and opinions. The upshot of my new-found resolve was that I stopped being mediocre. And, much to my surprise, became really good at sports.

But there was something that bothered me about sports at LCVR; before every match the nuns would pray for victory and to strengthen their prayers, they sprinkled holy water on the team. As I closed my eyes during these prayers I had questions. Why would God choose our team to win and not our opponent? Did God have favourites? And why call on God for help in a hockey match when South Africa was not yet free? I never dared voice these doubts even to my friends in the team. Giving voice to my thoughts would surely damn me. Back then I still believed in an angry Old Testament God, a God who sent plagues and spoke through burning bushes and whom I was trying hard to stop from striking me dead with bolts of lightning for my many blasphemous thoughts.

It is now 2020 and many decades since I left LCVR, and the year which was supposed to be my best year yet, has screeched to a halt. On 13 March 2020, Kenya like most of the world shut down, grounded by the coronavirus pandemic which started in Wuhan province in China and has now spread its killing spree to the whole globe. The response to stem infection and death rates is being informed by what China did to stop it and includes a raft of measures approved by the World Health Organization (WHO); total or partial lockdowns, sanitising common spaces, washing of hands and use of sanitisers, wearing of masks and testing, etc.

Most people have accepted the restrictions imposed on them by governments and recognised that they are necessary to minimise infections and deaths. However, some communities and countries have taken a contrarian approach and chosen not to adopt any of the measures that have proven to be effective. I am interested in the ways in which some members of the global Christian community have responded because, at least on the surface, they remind me so much of how the nuns at Loreto Convent Valley Road prayed to secure God's favour for our team before a match.

When the coronavirus came calling, many Christian communities set themselves apart and declared that they had special divine protection. They wanted to continue with their normal lives including gathering for church services. Yet the early lesson from a church in South Korea contradicted this assertion of religious immunity to the virus. One month after South Korea had its first infection, congregants and other members of the population in the vicinity of the Shincheonji Church of Christ in Daegu accounted for 5,080 cases of COVID-19 out of a total of 9,137 known cases by 25 March 2020. It was this infection that pushed the government to introduce policies to isolate the virus from the uninfected population. The government tested more than 200,000 members of the Shincheonji Church across the country and found that thousands tested positive. In response the government went on to mandate rigorous inspections at public gathering places deemed to be high-risk and then it closed schools and public spaces, and banned sporting events and large gatherings.

When the virus was first detected in South Korea, the founder of the Shincheonji Church, Mr. Lee Man-Hee made the claim that the epidemic was caused by “. . . the evil who got jealous of Shincheonji’s rapid growth”. That was until his church became the hardest-hit by the virus; he at least had the decency to get down on his knees and apologise.

In Kenya, the government responded to the coronavirus by closing schools, introducing a curfew and a partial lockdown, restricting movement in some counties, banning large public gatherings and testing. The Christian community in the country protested and on 20 March 2020, three pastors went to court to challenge the directive banning church gatherings. In the suit, the pastors acknowledged the measures put in place by the government to stop the spread but argued that precisely because of the virus, their congregations would be seeking solace in churches. The courts upheld the government’s ban.

But despite this ruling, there were still clergy who were flouting government efforts to control the spread of the virus in Kenya. In Meru, Nathan Kirimi, a pastor at Jesus Winner Ministry Church, defied the main leadership of his church by refusing to suspend worship services in his church and even scoffed at the sanitising and handwashing directive. Even mainstream churches like the Catholic Church in Kenya did not immediately comply. In late March 2020, the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops was still insisting that services would continue because the church is a “focal point of prayer where you will find solace and strength from God”. The government in Kenya had to stand firm to prevent many churches from not following the directives against mass gatherings and in some cases, congregations took matters of safety into their own hands and simply stayed away.

Tanzania’s President John Pombe Magufuli’s response to COVID-19 was typical of some of the Christian faithful. Tanzania’s president is a staunch Catholic and he insisted that the virus could not survive in Tanzania because the country was under the protection of the blood of Jesus. To strengthen this protection Magufuli declared three days of national prayers and even in early May 2020, he was still urging people to attend services in churches and mosques, saying that prayer can “vanquish the virus”. President Magufuli has increasingly engaged in rhetoric and conspiracy theories opposing all measures proposed by the WHO and trotting out anti-Western propaganda. But the virus is not human and will not be manipulated into ineffectiveness. Tanzania’s infection rates have started to spiral out of control, surpassing those of Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.

In the United States Christian communities took a similar stance with some claiming the virus to be a hoax or that it could be defeated not by science but by faith and supernatural means. In late March Rodney Howard Browne, a Pentecostal pastor in Tampa, Florida conducted two full-house services at his River Church. Other American pastors have made equally outlandish claims, Kenneth Copeland a Texas-based preacher claimed that the coronavirus was a weak strain of the flu, and that fearing the pandemic was a sin.

“Fear is a spiritual force. Fear is not OK. It is sin. It is a magnet for sickness and disease . . . You are giving the devil a pathway to your body”. Today the US accounts for the highest number of infections and deaths in the world.

The human tendency is to create ourselves as God’s chosen and to be anything else is unconscionable. I observed this inclination as my relatives took on Christianity. As they related to the Christian faith in prayer and in other forms of devotion, it was easy to mistake them for the Chosen. They retold the stories of the Old Testament as if they had been passed down by ancestors who had accompanied Moses on his quest to secure their freedom from the Pharaoh in Egypt. But COVID-19 is unforgiving. As the South Korea example shows, those Christian communities which have responded to the virus by declaring themselves immune have made their congregations vulnerable to infections by disarming them and rendering them helpless.

Let's go back to those prayers offered up by the nuns for our hockey team back at LCVR. At face value, those prayers and that holy water may have implied that we could bestow on ourselves the position of being God's chosen hockey, swimming and tennis teams and that we did not need to work for our victories. But that could not have been farther from the truth. Our success was a product of hard work. Loreto Convent Valley Road was a small school with very little land. We had just four tennis courts and a practice wall, we had no hockey pitch of our own and we had to walk twice a week to the Public Service Club to play hockey. But what we had was Sister Carmel, someone so passionate about sports and her girls that it was difficult to escape her passion.

We practiced relentlessly throughout the term and even during the holidays. Sister Carmel, a small Irish nun, was the architect of our success and she literally chased us onto tennis courts when we were not in class. She made sure we came early in the morning to put in practice. We were expected to be on the tennis courts at break time, at lunchtime, after school and during any free lesson, whilst school holidays found us in tennis camps run by coach Anne Greenwell. It was not surprising that LCVR became established as a place of sporting excellence for tennis, hockey, table-tennis and swimming such that in 1978, Kenya's team to the All Africa Games included six teenage girls from Loreto Convent Valley Road: Susan Githuku née Wakhungu, Betty Wamalwa (Sitawa Namwalie) Helen Pegrume, Kate Cruikshank, Gail Cruikshank and Ingrid Ronsky.

The coronavirus pandemic is happening at a time when the world is connected by a communications network that allows ordinary citizens to escape their borders and literally eavesdrop on other countries. In this interconnected world it is possible to identify the factors that are leading to success or failure in fighting the virus and as I scan the world, I see that leadership is a determining factor. Just like sister Carmel at Loreto Convent Valley Road, those leaders who prioritise their people are being effective regardless of the resources at their disposal. Examples include Rwanda, Seychelles, Namibia, Lesotho, Finland, Georgia, Uganda, Mauritius, New Zealand and Germany. Conversely, leaders who have focused on the economy or their re-election prospects, or are simply disinterested, are relying increasingly on rhetoric and conspiracy theories in an effort to distract their citizens from the relentlessness of COVID-19 infections and deaths. The presidents of the US, the UK, Tanzania and Brazil have distinguished themselves in using this approach and it is not surprising that the numbers in those countries are growing exponentially and that at this time the mighty United States leads the world in COVID-19 infections and deaths.

What do you see when you peep into Kenya?

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